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Historical Events

In the Vicinity of Philadelphia, Participated in by the Scotch-Irish in the Latter Part of the Year 1777. Also a Brief Account of Braddock's Defeat in the French and Indian War, 1755.

BY THOMAS SHARP,
Lt. Col. U. S. Army.

READ BEFORE THE
Hamilton Library Association
Carlisle, Pa., October 16, 1914,
By J. Webster Henderson, Esq.

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CARLISLE, PA., OCT. 16, 1914.

I am indebted to Mr. W. Homer Ames, of Carlisle, for historical research, also to Capt. John Colwell, U. S. N., former Naval Attache, for corroboratory information from British Colonial Records, in London, and to General Asa Bird Gardiner, U. S. A., for points in the tactics and equipment of the period.

T. S.

LOCAL HISTORY.

Events in the Vicinity of Philadelphia Participated in by the Scotch Irish in the Latter Part of the Year 1777. Also a Brief Account of Braddock's Defeat in French and Indian War, 1755.

BY THOMAS SHARP, LT. COL. U. S. ARMY.

Read Before the Hamilton Library Association, Carlisle, Pa., October 16, 1914, by J. Webster Henderson, Esq., and Published for the Historical Department.

When William Penn peopled his newly acquired possession he gave the land about Philadelphia to his English friends and the Quakers. The Germans would, he thought, make peaceable neighbors so he located them next to the first named in what is now Lancaster and Berks Counties, but the Scotch Irish were a stubborn, contentious people so he sent them toward and beyond the Susquehanna.

The spirit of acquisition inherent in Scotch character developed rapidly and they came in great numbers. In these days it would be called a boom.

With grief the Indians saw the forest melt away into stumpy fields and domestic animals take the place of wild game. It aroused their enmity and war followed. Appeals were made by the frontier people to Colony and Crown for

military protection, but they were met with the reply that as shown by Penn's experience the Indians were peaceable and if there was any trouble the whites were the aggressors.

The sentiment of the colony was generally against them but there were dissenters. One of these was Benjamin Franklin, who understood the situation and bent his resourceful mind to providing a remedy.

This he did by formulating a peculiar military system called "Associators" composed of men on the frontier.

All the men joined until a large company was raised. It was then divided into classes or sections, (as many as half a dozen) which were to be called into service in turn, while those left behind gave necessary aid to the families of those on duty.

This system was in vogue at the time of the outbreak of the Revolution. Though there were many regiments, I will speak more particularly of the brigade of Gen. Potter and will follow its history.

James Potter had been an Indian fighter all his life and had risen through the different grades from Lieutenant to Colonel

If you looked over the roster of a regiment of Potter's brigade you would almost think you were reading the names on the roll of membership of an old-time Scotch Presbyterian congregation.

Potter's own Scotch-Irish personality cropped out in the dialect and phraseology of his official papers. For example, he spelled Gen. Sullivan's name Solovan, and in telling of a hotly contested battle with superior numbers he said, "we dis-

puted the matter with them."

The brigade was in service in the army in 1777. It was at Brandywine but, being on the left of the line, saw nothing of the action. The American army was posted in a line facing the Brandywine. The art of military "security and information" was unknown in our army at that time and Howe, who was an accomplished soldier, made a fierce attack on the American front at "Chad's" ford, while by a detour the main body of his army crossed the Brandywine a few miles above and suddenly appeared in fighting line on Washington's right flank. The Americans attempted to change front to the right to meet them but it was too late and the British struck them in the maneuvre. To give the result in ball game parlance, Washington "scored a goose egg." Marquis Marie Jean Paul Roch Yves Gilbert Motier La Fayette had a part of his name shot away and a burning question was "which is the best road to Philadelphia?"

At Germantown the Associators were on the right where they encountered but little opposition and advanced so far that they had to be called back after the retreat had been commenced.

In December when Washington was encamped at Whitemarsh supplies of all kinds ran low. There was an unequal supply of ammunition. There were on the average of the army six rounds per man, though the Associators were pretty well supplied.

Howe contemplated a repetition of the movement which had been so successful at Brandywine, viz., a secret move until he could form line against one of Washington's flanks and then a vigorous at-

tack. But Washington got timely information of the plan, (probably the Lydia Darrah Legend might fit in here) and advanced Irvine's Division (in which was Potter's brigade and other Associators) to Chestnut Hill where a fierce little engagement took place. Irvine (himself a Scotch-Irishman by descent) was wounded and taken prisoner, but the British were checked and later fell back to Philadelphia. A few days after they made a like attempt on Washington's left but were repulsed by Morgan's riflemen.

When Washington decided to move from Whitemarsh to Valley Forge his plan was to cross the Schuylkill at Gulf Creek (near Norristown) where a temporary bridge was constructed by running wagons in the stream and laying a boardwalk on them.

Potter's brigade was sent some four miles down the river on the west bank.

When a part of the army (Sullivan's division) had crossed, a force of the British under Lord Cornwallis who had crossed at the middle ferry (Market St.) moved rapidly up, the object being to strike the Americans when divided by the river. These encountered the doughty Potter, whose generalship was here clearly shown. He divided his force and formed two lines, one on the best position at hand, and the other on a good position some distance in rear. The orders were for the line in front to "fight until overpowered, then fall back through the second line, reform on a good position and commence again when the second line, now become the first, fell back through them." In this way we "disputed the matter with them for

four miles."

To readily understand this, bear in mind that the heavy smooth bore musket carried by the British had an effective range of less than three hundred yards, and the Associators, being backwoodsmen, were marksmen.

Sullivan's division recrossed the Schuylkill and joined the main army.

Washington issued a general order thanking Potter's Brigade for the services rendered on this occasion.

The Army a few days later crossed the river higher up and reached Valley Forge.

History belittles the achievements of Potter and Irvine. It passes them by, by terming them "minor events in December, 1777."

Therefore, let me recapitulate some of the conditions attending the battle of Chestnut Hill, showing its importance.

The officers of the troops which arrived from the North flushed with their recent success clamored for the capture of Philadelphia. Washington well knew the futility of such an attempt, opposed it, and finally assembled a council of war to discuss it.

Four American officers in the council voted for an assault upon the lines of the greatly superior British force, but the General, sustained by eleven others, disregarded their murmurs and rejected "the mad enterprise."

On the night of December 4th, the British marched out in force to attack the American lines, and Washington knowing that his supply of ammunition was insufficient for a general engagement in the field, detailed Irvine's division (Associators and a small number of

Continentals) as a forlorn hope to meet and retard them.

We have all heard the story of Winkelried, who, reaching out his brawny arms to the right and to the left, gathered the points of the Austrian spears against his own bosom and pressing forward with the cry "make way for liberty" caused a breach in the enemy's lines through which his countrymen rushed to victory.

Such heroism was fittingly illustrated by Irvine, who rushed to the point of fiercest attack at Chestnut Hill from which he was carried away by the British, wounded and bleeding, while his object was accomplished, the British having been repulsed and a great disaster to the American army averted.

Irvine, as before said, met the enemy at Chestnut Hill, where, leading them, he heroically threw his division of raw Associators against an overwhelmingly greater force of highly trained British regulars, and checked their advance though his command suffered severely and he himself was wounded and taken prisoner.

But here let me note the factor his action became in general results. History tells us that Washington spent the day and night (of December 5th when the British were at Chestnut Hill) in strengthening his position at White Marsh. It does not describe his method of fortification, but as his men were largely backwoodsmen, expert with the axe and trees were plenty, I would conjecture that it was the construction of "abattis" so arranged as to hamper the movements of the British lines while an "enfilade fire" would be directed on

them.

Howe returned to Philadelphia and after a tentative skirmish on Washington's left refrained from the aggressive.

My belief is that he had in mind Braddock's defeat, where with like conditions sixty French soldiers, allied with one hundred and eighty couriers de bois and voyageurs and a few Indians, routed the finest army which up to that time had been mustered on the American continent.

Having referred to Braddock's defeat, let us give a brief account of it. It is Pennsylvania history.

The French Government, alarmed by the magnitude of Braddock's expedition, appealed to the scattered French settlements in America to rally to the aid of Fort Duquesne.

One of these was Michilimackinac, governed by Sieur De Langlede.

Le Langlede (more commonly called Langlede) was the son of a French nobleman and his Indian wife. He was born at Mackinac. As a boy he was educated under tutors in America and then sent to France to complete his education, after which he was commissioned in the French army. Having shown remarkable administrative ability he was sent to his native place as governor, (a small office having a large title.)

On receiving the notice to aid Fort Duquesne he took the force at Mackinac consisting of one company (sixty regulars) under Captain Beaujeau; gathered a force of voyageurs and couriers de bois, one hundred and eighty in number, seasoned men familiar with fire arms, and started in canoes down Lake Huron through the Detroit River

and Lake Erie to Presque Isle, (now Erie, Pa.) Thence they portaged their canoes over to the head waters of French Creek and floated down that and the Allegheny to Fort Duquesne.

On their arrival there they found Col. Contrecoeur, the Commandant, dismantling the fort and shipping the armament down the river in batteaux. On Langlede's inquiry why he did that, his reply was "When Braddock gets his artillery on that hill he will quickly knock our palisades into splinters." The reply of Langlede was "You need not let him get there at all; meet him in the woods." Contrecoeur, who was trained to large field movements, said his force was too small. Then Langlede bristled up and said "If you will do nothing, I will meet him with my own little command."

By that time the British were close at hand. Langlede made a quick reconnoisance, selected a spot with trees for his command, started out with it accompanied by a few volunteers from Fort Duquesne, followed by the loose vagabond Indians found near every fort incited by the hope of plunder.

Contrecoeur remained in the Fort shipping the stores down the river and would not believe that Braddock had been defeated until the Indians commenced to come in with plunder of a kind which would be abandoned only by a completely routed army. Then he fired a salute and prepared a report claiming that he had defeated Braddock by an overwhelming force of French and Indians.

Captain Beaujeau, who commanded the only company of regulars in the

action, being killed, could make no report, so Contrecoeur had the opportunity to fix it up to suit himself and from Contrecoeur's false report arises the confusion which has misled historians. He failed to mention Langlede and the Machilimackinac contingent, who really did all the fighting while the Duquesne garrison were making preparations to escape down the river.

To me it was straightened out by a scholarly French priest given to historical research (who had access to military, Jesuit and other records) with whom I became acquainted while stationed at Fort Mackinac. Contrecoeur may have shared the fate of Admiral Byng had the truth been known.

None of the regular Fort Duquesne garrison except a few young officers who managed to join Langlede as volunteers were in the action.

Let us now turn from the French to the British side. Gen. Braddock, who commanded, was an officer of about forty years' experience. He was brave as a lion, and, despite his years, as active as a colt, believed in the validity of the British military system, (the three rank battle formation) despised the Americans and the Indians and believed that if the latter were met by a "solid body" (as he termed it) they could be undone—would melt away.

The head of his column reached a somewhat open spot faced on the opposite side by a curtain of foliage and trees. Suddenly a man dressed as an Indian but wearing the decorations of an officer, sprang from the woods near the head of the column, waved a signal and quickly disappeared. At once fire on

the British troops commenced. Gage returned volleys but only hit the trees. Braddock hurried to the front of the column to form the "solid body" in line but the result of the maneuvre was to mass his troops against the very muzzles of a concealed and protected enemy. They made a better target than the proverbial "barn door." Every shot took effect; Braddock labored heroically, four horses were shot under him before he fell mortally wounded.

The result has often been told. It was first defeat, next retreat, then panic.

The term "deploy as skirmishers" was not as yet in the military vocabulary but Washington knew what was wanted and extended a line of riflemen at intervals in rear of the fleeing army. This, in connection with the fact that the French force was a very small one, saved Braddock's army.

As the correctness of my account depends largely on the numbers engaged I will prove it by one solitary witness, namely, Capt. Robert Orme, Aide De-Camp on Gen. Braddock's staff, who was a personal friend of Washington and a writer of repute on military subjects.

Capt. Orme says the number of the enemy did not exceed three hundred. Now, this calculation of the enemy by Capt. Orme was made while he and his command were under a withering fire which they had little opportunity to return. There are among you men who have been thus situated and you know the tendency is to overestimate the numerical force of the enemy. How is that?

The preparations by Contrecoeur to evacuate Ft. Duquesne on the approach

of Braddock in 1755, was again made available in 1758, when Forbes after a snail-like movement, approached within fifty miles of the place allowed Washington, who, with his Virginians, led the van to make such a vigorous attack that the entire French garrison (500 in number) embarked on a fleet of batteaux and floated down the Ohio, leaving the site on which Fort Pitt was established provided with munition of war.

This convinces me that the method had been devised long before (ab initio.) to secure the safety of the garrison, which was insecure by reason of remoteness from other French settlements and rather closely contiguous to ever advancing English colonies.

My belief is that the purpose of the French in establishing Fort Duquesne (built in 1754) was not to secure supremacy in the Allegheny region, but to prevent the emigration of English speaking population to the Mississippi valley (mainly French territory.)

France had secured sites on all the streams flowing into "The Father of Waters" and there was in France a sanguine vision of glories to be attained by combining French thrift with American soil and climate. This, I think, accounts for their ever preparedness to move the Duquesne force to some point further down the river.

Let us now drop the French and Indian War and return to the war for Independence.

Braddock's defeat was the first large engagement in which Washington participated and he was quick to see that the heavy three rank line of battle, formidable as it was in the open field, came to

naught when directed against a force properly posted in a well selected woods. It was a lesson which he (Washington) kept in mind and a resource which he held in reserve from the time he took command at Cambridge until the smoke of the last gun fired at Yorktown faded away in the mist of the York River.

While Howe, with more than twenty thousand well appointed, well equipped and well disciplined men, spent the winter in Philadelphia, Washington's half clothed, half starved, greatly diminished army shivered at Valley Forge. Irregular American detachments patroled the neutral ground between the two places and Benjamin Franklin, "facile princeps" of diplomats, commenced to secure the recognition of our government by the nations of the world.

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